

Language Development

Attempts to explain language development have sparked a spirited intellectual controversy. At the heart of this controversy is the nature-nurture debate. Behaviorist B. F. Skinner believed that we can explain how babies acquire language entirely with principles of learning, such as the *association* of objects with the sounds of words, the *imitation* of language modeled by others, and the *reinforcement* of correct use of words and syntax by parents and teachers. Linguist Noam Chomsky, who favors the nature position, believes that much of our language capacity is inborn. According to this perspective, just as "learning" to walk is programmed according to a timetable of biological maturation, so children are prewired to begin to babble and talk.

In this exercise, review each of the following examples of language use by children and decide whether it *best* supports the position of B. F. Skinner or Noam Chomsky. Then explain your reasoning.

1. While Marie and her mother are looking at a book together, Marie's mother shows her a picture of an animal and says "cow." Marie says "cow," and her mother praises her for her correct utterance. Two pages later, Marie spontaneously points to a picture and correctly identifies it as a *cow*.
2. When his day care teacher asks 2-year-old Jack what he did last Saturday, he responds with "We goed to the zoo." His teacher smiles, marveling at the fact that all children Jack's age make this type of grammatical error.
3. Nicole, who is deaf and was not exposed to sign language until age 3, lacks the manual linguistic skills of deaf children born to deaf-signing parents.
4. Twelve-year-old Malcolm, who emigrated to the United States at age 4, understands English grammar much better than 20-year-old Maya, who was first exposed to English at age 12.